

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 31

Sufi Mysticism and Poetics III

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. We are discussing Sufi mysticism and Poetics. So we were talking about the gendered nature of the lyrics where we find a feminized voice, the voice of the devotee as a female, a beloved, beseeching union with the lover, the divine lover or the Murshid. So the gender construction of kafanīā or shroud and the ghungaṭīā or veil in the musician's narrative is very interesting because both these words kafanīā and ghungaṭīā that recurrently come back in Sufi lyrics, they are both male nouns. However they are referring to feminine objects. Kafanīā and ghungaṭīā are themselves male nouns but they are associated with the female, the female accessories or objects donned by the females.

The Sufi vocalists use the gendered form of the noun 'Jogan,' which refers to the female mendicant, the female wanderer, and this term 'Jogan' has been derived from the main noun 'Jogi'. So, Jogi or the ascetic, its female noun is Jogan, Jogania. They add "ia" to Jogan and make it Jogania. These devices convey a kind of humility.

The Islamic, you know, expression for humility would be ījz, ījz or humility, and the humility further creates intimacy in the performance through the forms of address. So it is not only Jogan but as a way of intimately referring to the Jogan, one says in Sufi lyrics Jogania, right? It emphasizes, accentuates humility or ījz. The ghungaṭ invokes bridal imagery or kaśf, which is the lifting of the veil in Sufi poetry. So kaśf is the lifting of the veil in Sufi poetry and it is a common erotic image available in so many of the Sufi poems. In the Sufi poetry sung in the oral traditions around the Siraikei belt of Multan, Bahawalpur, Mianwali and the northern Sindh areas, the female voices are very prominent, they are dominant.

The feminized narrator is dominantly available. Large number of Abida Parveen's lyrics are derived from resources such as the kāfīs or short verses that express mystical thoughts. So what is a kāfī? That is another lyrical composition we are going to discuss today. Kāfī is a composition meant to be sung along with music. Its subject is commonly mystical and its central theme is repeated in the refrain in order to create the context or the samā.

Now kāfī uses folk motifs from its immediate environment to emphasize the mentor-disciple or the Murshid-Murid relationship. Furthermore, the earthly metaphors communicate or lead to the spiritual metaphors. Earthly metaphors or *isq-e majāzī* are a way to understanding the spiritual metaphors or *isq-e haqīqī*. So Sheikh Farid or Fariduddin Ganjshakar who is also commonly known as Baba Farid is said to be the creator of this kāfī form in which the human soul is a feminized one. It is treated as a female beloved and contextualized in the imagery of marriage. In the following kāfī by Siraiki Sufi poet Khwaja Ghulam Farid, the female narrator mourns a separation from her beloved who has gone to a distant land.

So it goes as follows: *Mē t tek mint kardī Sval asn bhāl*, translated to English I beg thee, O beloved, cast thy good fortune on us. In another kāfī, the female lover is described in bridal imagery through the following lyrics- *Musāg malīndā gūzar gayā ḍehn sārā, Singhār karīndā guzar gayā ḍehn sārā, Kajlā pāyām surkhī lāyam, Kītam yār vasārā, Kāng ūḍende ūmar vihāntī, Ayā nā yār pīyārā*. Translated to English, "The entire day I have spent to polish my teeth, the entire day I have spent to adorn myself, kohl I put on my eyes, my lips I color, the beloved I recall, a lifetime have I spent to shoo away the crow, but thou, my beloved, never came." So it is a song about longing, a song about waiting for one's, you know, one's beloved to come, one's lover to come.

Khawaja Farid also uses Hir's voice, Hir's persona for the ultimate spiritual union or *isq-e haqīqī* through the imagery of *isq-e majāzī* or earthly love as can be understood through the following lines. So, "*Haṭan mē Rānjhaṅ hoī Rehā farq nā koī*," even translated to English, "With Ranjha have I become one, Between us is there no separation." So "With Ranjha have I become one, Between us is there no separation." These kāfīs are somewhat similar to the images of the suffering and pining female in the Bhakti poetry where the theme of separation is called *viraha* and the feminized narrator expressing *viraha*, expressing the feelings of *viraha* is called the *virahini*; the female, you know, beloved suffering, the pangs of *viraha* is called as the *virahini*. The feelings of separation expressed through the female narrator are available in the indigenous poetic traditions of

different vernacular languages. The woman usually professes her love for the divine and a female; so feelings of separation expressed through the female narrator are available in the indigenous poetic traditions, available in different vernacular languages where the woman professes her love for the divine. Female *sufiānā-kalām* singers like Abida Parvin, Reshma, and Surraiya Multanikar, they all sing with the *virāhīnī* voice...the refrain and the emotions of the *virāhīnī* or the separated, yearning beloved.

Virahini poetry is also sung in the Sindhi devotional contexts such as the maulads which celebrate Prophet Muhammad's birth. In these songs, in the mauluds, the devotee is usually a young bride or bride-to-be, who awaits her bridegroom and the image of the bridegroom is equated with Prophet Muhammad. All kinds of bridal imageries such as the wedding ceremonies of Mehndi is expressed through the Sufi lyrics. Interestingly, these poems equate the bhakti concept of *virāhā* with the Sufi concept of *ishq*, right? So what is *virāhā* in the bhakti repertoire, you know, becomes *ishq* in the Sufi tradition, referring to the burning, consuming, longing of one's soul to unite with the supreme one, the god. So Amir Khusrau adapted the voices of longing in his discourse and a number of critics claim that the use of the female narrator, feminized narrative voice in the Sufi poetry of Northern India could partially be an influence from the Persian poetic genre called the *cāmā*.

So it is on the one hand an influence from the local immediate, you know, environment, the bhakti tradition that is dominant in the Indic context and on the other hand, some of the critics point out that the feminized voice, the longing of the beloved could be an influence from the Persian poetic genre called the *cāmā*. So like the Hindawi *gīt*, *cāmā* is said to be a popular poetic form that is suitable for adaptation to music and it was used in rural Persia for women's songs. The *cāmā* is a poem or a song in Persian not exceeding 17 couplets. So Sufi lyrics available in South Asia belong to a variety of indigenous hybrid oral poetic traditions. So another poetic convention which is linked with the female voice is that of *Rekhti*.

Rekhti is a major poetic genre in the Deccani literature of South India. That is also something that deeply influences and inspires the Sufi lyrics of South Asia. *Rekhti* is a sub-genre of Urdu poetry written in the *ghazal* form, in which the narrator is a woman and where the narrative idiom is said to be that of women. So in *Rekhti* what we are discussing or what we are, you know, celebrating is “*aurtō kī bolī*”, the discourse of the females. *Rekhti* is set in gendered opposition to *Rekhta* which is another name for

standard Urdu ghazal poetry, and it seems to have become equated with any poetry having a female narrator regardless of the poetic diction.

The presence of the female narrator in the Deccan poetry has made it non-canonical with respect to the mainstream Urdu literature. So it, in a way one could say that Rekhti exists as a counter-discourse to the larger Rekhta tradition. It is a breakaway, it is a kind of, it is not antithetical but it is a kind of counter-gaze, it is a comeback on the Rekhta discourse which is almost celebrating a homosocial milieu, right, from where the woman is very, very, very prominently absent, very obviously absent. So Rekhti is celebrating that female cosmos which has remained kind of absent, invisibilized in the, in Islamic literature at large. So within the canonical North Indian literatures Rekhti discusses what one can say as the “aurat kī taraf se jazbāt kā izhār karnā,” in other words expression of passions or emotions from the woman's point of view.

So Carla Petievich uses John Thompson Platt's definition of Rekhti which is derived from Rekhta, referring to Hindustani verse written in the language of women and expressing the sentiments peculiar to them. The critics argue that generally poetic conventions of canonical Perso-Arabic literatures have marginalized the creations where the narrator is the female. The female voice is predominant in the grassroots, in the indigenous Sufianna Kalam traditions and sometimes in the Qawwali traditions, you know, that are composed in indigenous context. So the Bulleh Shah qawwāls sing the poet's Panjabi poetry in the Panjabi ang (style), where they create the female myths in their lyrics. The female myths are generally sung in the Sufianna Kalam available in vernacular languages with minimum or minimal musical instruments, sometimes the only instrument being the Iktara.

The presence of the female narrator in Sufi discourse points to how the Sufi is an offshoot or a breakaway from the established clerical order just like the Bhakti movement is a breakaway from the Brahminical tradition or the Brahminical order. The established orders have always taken upon themselves the interpretation of the faith, creating some institutionalized power structures for the ruling classes. Economic hegemony could be sustained through religious, social and cultural structures that were upheld by the clerics and patriarchs. So economic hegemony could possibly be maintained only through such codified practices, codified and prescribed understandings of religion and social mores, cultural structures, cultural practices. So through the mainstream institutionalized religions, shame and honor became associated with a control on women's sensibilities.

So a restraint on women's expression was something that any institutionalized form of religion emphasized. The improvised Sufi poetry that Abida Parveen for example uses in her performances subvert such orthodox notions. So Abida Parveen refers to Shah Abdul Latif's poetry and Khwaja Ghulam Farid's texts, and she uses frames from Sufi poetry in order to chastise or criticize the religious establishment and thereby speak for the marginalized groups. The radio in Pakistan has played a significant role in identifying and bringing to the fore musicians and thereby providing them with a livelihood. Female musicians such as Abida Parveen are immersed in the spirit or rule of Sufi poetics and music, and they can create their own *racão* or context within which their discourse flourishes.

It could be called a discourse, it could also be called a context or *racão* for the formation of a counter-discourse. Abidha Parveen's evolution has been within grassroots mystical traditions which is later enhanced through her training in the semi-classical and classical traditions of music under her father's guidance, Ustad Ghulam Haider, and later by her tutors Ustad Nazakat Ali Khan and Ustad Manzur Hussain. So these are some of the trainers, her own father as well as two of her mentors that have trained her in the semi-classical and classical traditions. As she was trained within the male traditions, dominantly male traditions, her style is somewhat exceptional. Abida Parveen uses the *dohra* or the *bait*, in other words short two-line verses within the main body of the narrative, and this is a style she has imbibed from her male mentors which includes her late husband Shaikh Ghulam Hussain.

So she has been trained by a number of male performers and singers and her own performance has adapted those particular styles that are associated with male renditions. So because Abida Parveen has been trained chiefly by a number of male performers, so her performance has adapted the male style of Sufi rendition. The fact that now Abida Parveen has introduced the *qaul* in the *sufiānā-kalām* tradition further fits in with the argument that she is perhaps the only female musician who applies essentially a unique male style, a style that she has inherited from a series of male trainers and mentors that she had. So the *qawwālī* genre of Sufi music is essentially a main domain in the officially organized urs celebrations in Pakistan that commemorate the Sufi saints death anniversary at their shrines. Some key musicians are invited to sing.

One could imagine that in ours most of the key Sufi singers are males, they are male performers. A female performer such as Abida Parveen is also invited to sing at Shah Abdul Latif's shrine which is not a mean thing, which is not a small thing, it is revolutionary in itself. The fact that she is visible, she has attained visibility within a homosocial discourse such as the qawwālī, right. Although she does not belong to the roving minstrel tradition, she does sing lyrics related to the tradition at the shrines and in the councils. So before we end today's lecture, there is one thing we need to understand clearly that while on the one hand these compositions, these lyrics have been written in a feminized voice, the singers are themselves male vocalists, right.

They are singing in feminized voices as the bride of the Murshid, as the bride of the god, but they are nonetheless male singers. The fact that Abidha Parveen has been able to make a space of her own within this homosocial discourse of qawwālī, within this homosocial qawwālī tradition, you know, says a lot about how successful she is, what kind of a superstar or stardom, you know, Abida Parveen enjoys and the kind of androgynous appearance that she wears, the androgynous voice that she sings in is remarkable and unparalleled. With this, I am going to stop our lecture here today and let us talk more on this topic in our ensuing lectures. Thank you. Thank you.